

THE Princess Virginia

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He's a strong man—too strong to be trapped in the meshes of any pink and white Vivien. And if he admired a young woman not of royal blood he would keep his distance for her sake. You say this English miss is with her mother at the principal hotel of Kronburg. If Leopold constantly visited them there we should have a scandal. On the other hand, to suggest meeting the girl outside or incognito would be an insult. Either way he would be but poorly rewarding a woman who saved his life.

Baroness von Lyndal's color rallied to the surprise of her rooms, and her smile dwelled to naught, for she had inside upon the argument, and it was going against her.

In her haste to vex the chancellor she had not stopped to study from every side this question she had raised. So far she had merely shown a girl irritating him, and she owed him much more than a rebuff. Such ill-temper and wounds she had contrived to give the man in abundance during her twenty-two years at the Rhodian court, but now if she hurt him at all, she would like the state to be deep and memorable.

To be sure, in beginning the conversation she had thought of nothing more than a momentary gratification, but the very heat of the argument, which she had thrown herself had warmed her malice and sharpened the weapon of her wit. She could justify her expressed opinion only by example, and it occurred to her that she might be able to shape events in such a way that she could say with eyes if not in words, "I told you so."

Her frowning smile brightened. "Dear chancellor, you do well to have faith in your imperial pupil," said she. "You've helped to make him what he is, and you're ready to keep him what he should be. I suppose even that if being but a young man and having the hot blood of his race, he should stray into a phantasmic path you would take advantage of old friendship to set up signposts and barriers?"

"Were there the slightest chance of such necessity arising?" grumbled the chancellor, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's like your integrity and courage. What a comfort, then, that the necessity is so unlikely to arise!"

The old man looked at her with level gaze, the ruthless look that brushes away a woman's paint and powder and coldly counts the wrinkles underneath. "I must have misunderstood you, then, a moment ago," he said. "I thought your argument was all the other way round, madam."

"I told you I was amusing myself. What can one do at a ball when one has reached the age when it would be foolish to dance? Why, I believe that Lady Mowbray and her daughter are not remaining long in Kronburg."

At last she was able to judge that she had given the chancellor a few uneasy moments, for his eyes brightened visibly with relief. "Ah," he returned, "then they are going out of Rhætia!"

"Not exactly that," said the baroness slowly, pleasantly and distinctly. "I hear that they've been asked to the country to visit one of his majesty's oldest friends."

Leopold was not supposed to care for dancing, though he danced—as it was his pride to do all things—well. Certainly there was often a perfunctoryness about his manner in a ballroom, a suggestion of the soldier on duty in his unsimiling face and his readiness to lead a partner to her seat when a dance was over.

But tonight a new Leopold moved to the music. A girl's white arm on his—slender arm which had been quick and firm as a man's in his defense—the perfume of a girl's hair and the gold glints upon it, the shadow of a girl's dark lashes and the light in a pair of gray eyes when they were lifted, the beating of a girl's heart near him, the springtime grace of a girl's sweet youth in its contrast with the voluptuous summer of Rhætian types of beauty, the warm rose that spread upward from a girl's childlike dimples to the womanly arch of her brows—all these charms and more which rendered one girl a hundred times adorable took hold of him and made him not an emperor, but a man, unarmored.

When the music ceased he fancied for an instant that some accident had befallen the musicians. Then when he realized that the end of the dance had come in its due time he remembered with pleasure a rule of his court established in the days of those who had been before him. After each dance an interval of ten minutes was allowed before the beginning of another. Ten minutes are not much to a man who has things to say which could hardly

be said in ten hours. Still, they are something, and to waste even one would be like spilling a drop of precious elixir from a tiny bottle containing but nine other drops.

They had scarcely spoken yet, except for commonplaces which any one might have overheard, since the day on the mountain, and in this first moment of the ten each was wondering whether or no that day should be figured between them. Leopold did not feel that it should be spoken of, for it was possible that the girl did not recognize the charms hunter in the emperor, and Virginia did not feel that she could speak of it. But, then, few things turn out as people feel they should.

Next to the throne room was the bathroom, and beyond was another known as the waldland, which Leopold had fitted up for the gratification of a fancy. It was named the waldland because it represented a wood. Walls and ceiling were masked with thick growing creepers trained over by visible wires, through which peered stars of electric light, like the check-ering of sunshine between forest branches. Trees grew up, with their roots in boxes hidden beneath the moss covered floor. There were grotesque of ivy draped rock in the corners, and here and there, out from lonely shadows, glistened the glass eyes of birds and animals—owls, snakes, chamois, wolves and bears—which the emperor had shot.

This strange room, so vast as to seem empty when dozens of people wandered beneath its trees and among its rock grotesques, was thrown open to guests whenever a ball was given at the palace, but the conservatories and palm houses were more popular, and when Leopold brought Miss Mowbray to the waldland after their dance it was in the hope that they might not be disturbed.

She was lovelier than ever in her white dress under the trees, looking up at him with a wonderful look in her eyes, and the young man's calmness was mastered by the beating of his blood.

"This is a kind of madness," he said to himself. "It will pass. It must pass." And aloud, meaning all the while to say something different and commonplace, the real words in his mind broke through the crust of conventionality. "Why did you do it?"

Virginia's eyes widened. "I don't understand!" Then, in an instant, she found that she did understand. She knew, too, that the question had asked itself in spite of him, but that once it had been uttered he would stand to his guns.

"I mean the thing I shall have to thank you for always."

If Virginia had had time to think she might have prepared some pretty answer; but, there being no time, her response came, as his question had, from the heart, "I couldn't help doing it."

"You couldn't help risking your life to?" He dared not finish.

"It was to save." Nor was there any end for her sentence.

Then perhaps it was not strange that he forgot certain restrictions which a royal man in conversing with a commoner is not supposed to forget. In fact, he forgot that he was royal and that she was not, and his voice grew unsteady, his tone eager, as if he had been some poor subaltern with the girl of his first love.

"There's something I must show you," he said. Opening a button of the military coat blazing with jewels and orders, he drew out a loop of thin gold chain. At the end dangled a small bright thing that flashed under a star of electric light.

"My ring!" breathed Virginia.

Thus did the emperor's intention to ignore the day that had been theirs together.

"Your ring! You gave it to Leo. He kept it. He will always keep it. Have I surprised you?"

Virginia felt it would be best to say "Yes," but instead she answered "No," for pretty white fibs cannot be told under such a look in a man's eyes by a girl who loves him.

"I have not? When did you guess the truth—yesterday or?"

"At Allehelgen."

Silence fell for a minute, while Leopold digested the answer and its full meaning. He remembered the bread and ham, the cow he could not milk, the rucksacks he had carried. He remembered everything and laughed.

"You knew at Allehelgen? Not on the mountain when?"

"Yes, I guessed even then. I confess, Oh, I don't mean that I went there ex-



"My ring!" breathed Virginia.

pecting to find you. I didn't. I think I shouldn't have gone had I known. Every one believed you were at Mylinbad, but when I tumbled down and you saved me I looked up and of course I'd seen your picture, and one reads in the papers that you're fond of chasing hunters. I wouldn't be surprised if you were. Oh, I'm sorry you asked me that."

"Why?"

"Because one might have to be afraid of an emperor if he were angry."

"Do I look angry?"

Their eyes met again, laughing at first, then each finding depths in the other's which drove away laughter. Something in Leopold's breast seemed to stir, and struggling to be free from forgetfulness, like a fierce wild bird. He was his lips tightly, breathing hard. Then he got that a question had been asked, but it was Virginia who spoke last, since it is easier for a woman than a man to hide feeling.

"I wonder why you kept the ring after my—my betrothal?"

"I had a good reason for keeping it."

"What's your reason?"

"You're quick at forming conclusions, Miss Mowbray. Can't you guess?"

"To remind you to beware of strong young women on mountains."

"No."

"Because your own picture is in it."

"It was a better reason than that."

"And I not to ask it?"

"On that day you asked what you chose. All the more should you do so now, since there's nothing I could refuse you."

"Not the half of your kingdom, like the royal men in fairy stories?"

As soon as the words were out Virginia would have given much to have them back. She had not thought of a meaning they might convey, but she tried not to blush lest he should think of it now. Nevertheless he did think of it, and the light words, striking a chord they had not aimed to touch, went echoing on and on till they reached that part of himself which the emperor knew least about—his heart.

"Half his kingdom? Yes, he would give it to this girl if he could. Heavens, what it would be to share it with her!"

"Ask anything you will," he said as a man speaks in a dream.

"Then tell me—why you kept the ring."

"Because the only woman I ever cared—to make my friend took it from her finger and gave it to me."

"Now the emperor is pleased to pay compliments."

"You know I am sincere."

"But you'd seen me only for an hour. Instead of deserving your friendship, I'm afraid I—"

"For one hour? That's true. And how long ago is that one hour? A week or so, I suppose, as time counts. But then came yesterday and the thing you did for me. Now I've known you always."

"If you had, perhaps you wouldn't want me for your friend."

"I do want you."

The words would come. It was true already. He did want her, but not as a friend. His world—a world without women, without passion fiery enough to devour principles or traditions—was upside down.

It was well that the ten minutes' grace between dances was over and the music for the next about to begin. A young officer, Count von Breitstein's half brother, who was to be Miss Mowbray's partner, appeared in the distance looking for her, but stopped, seeing that she was still with the emperor.

"Goodby," said Virginia while her words could still be only for the ears of Leopold.

"Not goodby. We're friends."

"Yes. But we shan't meet often."

"Why? Are you leaving Kronburg?"

"Perhaps—soon. I don't know."

"I must see you again. I will see you once more, whatever comes."

"Once more, perhaps. I hope so, but—"

"After that?"

"Who knows?"

"Once more—once more!" The words echoed in Virginia's ears. She heard them through everything, as one hears the undertone of a mountain torrent, though a brass band may busy to drown its deep music.

Once more he would see her, whatever might come. She could guess why it might be only once, though he would have that once again, and again repeated, for this game of hers, begun with such a light heart, was more difficult to play than she had dreamed.

If she could but be sure he cared, if he would tell her so in words and not with eyes alone, the rest might be easy, although at best she could not see the end. Yet how in honor could he tell Miss Helen Mowbray that he cared? And if the telling were not to be in honor how could she bear to live her life?

"Once more!" What would happen in that "once more"? Perhaps nothing save a repetition of grateful thanks and courteous words akin to a farewell.

To be sure, Lady Mowbray and her daughter might run away and the negotiations between the emperor's advisers and the Grand Duchess of Rhætia might be allowed to go on as if no outside influence had interrupted the peaceful current of events. Then in the end a surprise would come for Leopold. Willful Virginia would have played her little comedy, and all might be said to end well. But Virginia's heart refused to be satisfied with so tame a plot. She needed a touch to her thoughts so conventional as to be distastefully obvious, almost if not quite a failure.

She had seen to arrange a color and stimulating dress, she who had been brought up to dress in white and blue, and she had resolved to put down skirts and half full of sparkling netting.

"Once more!" If only that once could be magnified into many times. It was not her chance, her chance, her chance, like the lucky girls who were too royal.

So she was thinking in the capital by her mother's side, and this young dreamer had to speak twice before her daughter knew their silence had been broken.

"I forgot to tell you something, Virginia."

"Yes, mother?"

"Your great success has made me apprehensive, child. You looked like a shining white lily among all those handsome, overgrown Rhætian women."

"Thank you, dear. Was that what you thought me to say?"

"Oh, no! It was this: The Baroness von Lyndal has been most kind. She urges us to give up our rooms at the hotel on the first of next week and join her home party at Schloss Lyndalberg. It's only a few miles out of town. What do you think of the plan?"

"Leave Kronburg?"

"She's asked a number of friends to meet the emperor."

"Oh! He didn't speak of it when we danced?"

"But she has mentioned it to him since, no doubt—before giving me the invitation. Intimate friend of his as she is, she wouldn't dare ask people to meet him if he hadn't first sanctioned the suggestion. Still, she can afford to be more or less informal. The baroness was dancing with the emperor, I remember now, just before she came to me. They were talking together quite earnestly. I can recall the expression of his face."

"Was it pleased, or—"

"I was wondering what she could have said to make him look so happy. Perhaps—"

"What answer did you give Baroness von Lyndal?"

"I told her I thought you wouldn't mind. I told her we would go."

The moods of Baroness von Lyndal concerning grim old Schloss Breitenstein had varied many times during her years of residence by the lake. Sometimes she pleased herself by reflecting that the great man who had slighted her lived in less luxury than she had attained by her excellent marriage. Again, the thought of the ancient lineage of the present Count von Breitstein filled her with envy, and oftener than all the feeling that the "old grizzly bear" could crouch in his den and watch sneeringly everything which happened at Lyndalberg got upon the lady's nerves. She could have sworn and shaken her fist at the dark mass of rock and stone across the water, but after the birthday ball and during the first days of Leopold's visit at her house she often threw a whimsical glance at the grim silhouette against the northern sky and smiled.

"Can you see, old bear?" she would ask gayly. "Are you spying over there? Do you think yourself all-wise and all-powerful? Do you see what's in my mind now, and do you guess partly why I've taken all this trouble? Are you racking your brain for some way of spoiling my little plans? But you can't do it, you know. It's too late. There's nothing you can do except sit still and growl and glare at your own claws, which a woman has slipped. How do you like the outlook, old bear? Do you lie awake at night and study how to save your scheme for the emperor's marriage? All your grumpy old life you've dreamed women, but now you're beginning at last to find out that, powerful as you are, there are some things a woman with tact and money, nice homes and a good name, a husband can do which the huge, stammering old bear can't do. How soon shall I make you admit this, Chancellor bear?"

Thus the baroness, standing at her dressing room window, would narrow herself in old moments when she was not arranging original and elaborate entertainments for her guests. And she congratulated herself particularly on having had the forethought to invite Egon von Breitstein, the emperor's half brother.

There was a barrier of thirty years' difference in age between the two, and they had never been friends in the true sense of the word, for the old man was temperamental, unable to sympathize with the tastes or understand the temptations of the younger brother, and the younger man was mentally unable to appreciate the qualities of the older.

Nevertheless it was rumored at court that Egon had more than once used the old and good looking captain of cavalry for a valet in putting some very big and hot chestnuts out of the fire. At all events, "Haplophragma," as known among his followers, "the chancellor's jackal," thus nicknamed by his enemies, would have found difficulty in keeping up appearances without the allowance granted by his powerful half brother. The ill-assorted pair were often in communication, and the baroness liked to think that news from Lyndalberg might sooner or later be wafted like a wind-blown scent of roses across the water to Schloss Breitenstein.

She was still less displeased than surprised, therefore, when, the emperor having been three days at Lyndalberg, with two more days of his visit to run, an urgent message arrived for Captain von Breitstein from his brother.

Poor old Egon was wrestling with his enemy, gout, it appeared, and wished for Egon's immediate presence.

Such a summons could not be neglected. Egon's whole future depended upon his half brother's caprice, he hinted to the baroness in asking leave to desert her pleasant party for a few hours. So of course she sent the chancellor her regrets, with the baron's, and Egon went off charged with a friendly message from the emperor as well.

When the captain of cavalry had set out from Lyndalberg to Schloss Breitenstein by the shortest way—across the lake in a smart little motor boat—promising to be back in time for dinner and a concert, the baroness spent all her energy in getting up an impromptu riding party, which would give Leopold the chance of another tete-a-tete with Miss Mowbray.

Already many such chances had been arranged, so cleverly as not to excite gossip, and if the flirtation, destined by the hostess to disgust Leopold with his chancellor's matrimonial projects, did not advance by leaps and bounds it was certainly not the fault of Baroness von Lyndal.

"Egon has been told to use his eyes and ears for all they're worth at Lyndalberg, and now he's called upon to hand in his first report," she said to herself when the younger von Breitstein was off on his mission across the lake.

But for once, at least, the "chancellor's jackal" was wronged by an unjust suspicion. He arrived at Schloss Breitenstein ignorant of his brother's motive in sending for him, though he shrewdly suspected it to be something quite different from the one alleged.

The chancellor was in his study, a deep windowed tower room, with walls oak lined nearly to the cross-beamed ceiling. He sat reading a budget of letters when Egon was announced, and if he were really ill he did not betray his suffering. The

CHAPTER NINE

SCHLOSS LYNDALBERG towers high on a promontory overlooking a lake seven or eight miles to the south of the Rhætian capital. The castle is comparatively modern, with pointed turrets and fretted minarets, and, being built of white Carrara marble, throws a reflection snowy as a submerged swan into the clear green water of the Mommensee. All the surroundings of the palace, from its broad terraces to its jeweled fountains and well high tropical gardens, suggest luxury, gaiety, pleasure.

But on the opposite bank of the Mommensee is huddled the dark shape of an ancient fortified stronghold, be- gun no one knows how many centuries ago by the first Count von Breitstein. Generation following generation the men of that family completed the work until nowadays it is difficult to know where the rock ends and the castle begins. There, like a dragon squatting on the coils of its own tail, the dark mass is poised, its deep set window eyes glaring across the bright water at the white splendor of Lyndalberg like the malevolent stare of the monster waiting to spring upon and devour a fair young maiden.